

James Berger

## 15 Questions For James Berger, author of *Under the Impression*

### Interview

#### 1. Tell me about your book.

*Under the Impression* is about things that are underneath: pressed, repressed, submerged, suppressed, oppressed. Things that are under pressure, receiving impressions, pressed. This is political and psychological, and the two, of course, mix. I was thinking of a book that would have poems at the beginning and the end, and would have a set of short prose pieces about political organizing in the middle. I had been very taken with Ann Lauterbach's book *Under the Sign*, which has a central prose section on poetics, and I thought I'd like to do something similar with politics. The poetry is poetry, which goes where it wants to go; and the central prose section would be stories mostly from my political organizing in New Haven; stories of how people try to build a base of political power, street by street, meeting by meeting; full of conflict, frustration, and a few victories. Something of Lauterbach's title reached my book, but that formal element did not. The main thing that got in the way was Trump's election in 2016. A week after that horrible November day, I was visited by the idea for a new political movement that did not and could not exist. A couple of lines came into my mind...

*"OBU is a national organization supporting social justice and democracy and opposing tyranny, oligarchy and racism. It is extraordinary in its effectiveness, cohesiveness, commitment, and imagination.*

*"OBU does not exist."*

... and OBU: One Big Union/Oligarchy Busters United came into being, or rather, did not. So, I composed *The OBU Manifestos*, which was published in June 2017 (Dispatches Editions/ Spuyten Duyvil Press); and then I compiled, edited, and partly composed *The OBU Manifestos vol. 2*, which was published on the same press in August 2019.

So, my direct political-utopian-parodic commentary went into OBU. I no longer felt the need or wish to put in that central prose section on politics. I'd already done it. So, the book-in-progress went back to being poetry. But its poems still had a lot to do with energies and forces from one place exerted, impressed, onto another. What does it mean to be "under the impression"? Well, it can mean to believe something on the basis of some current information, but the belief may or may not be accurate. Or it can mean to have something forced or pressed upon you that created an impression, an image, an imprint, a representation. A coin receives an imprint. A print receives an image. To be impressed means to respond with excitement or awe to some impression. It also means to be conscripted, pressed into service. Something above exerts force on something below. That was the informing idea.

"under contract under the pile of newspapers  
under the ancillary omnipotent of circumstances,  
under the chains of consequence..." (From "Under the Impression")

Once I'd gotten the OBU books out, exorcized, had lost that voice, I got back to "Under," though I hadn't figured out yet "under *what*." But I had a lot of poems that more or less brought out the idea. I had to figure out how to organize them. I was thinking for a while in distinct thematic terms. There were poems that were distinctly political; there were poems that were on the "meta"-side, poems about poetry, composition, etc.; there were poems about death, and the deaths of my parents; there were poems about love and/or sex; there were a number of sonnets; there were some very short poems; there were poems, perhaps incongruously, about joy. I thought of the book in sections according to theme, with section titles. I tried that out and didn't like it. It was too rigid; it denied the reality of slippage. So, I experimented with more numerous but shorter sections—maybe five poems in each section—and the sections without titles, or numbers, and separated by... ampersands: &&&&&&&&. The book seemed to breathe better that way. There was still some thematic coherence in each section, but it didn't press the issue.

I must mention finally the cover of the book, the image of the painting "Blue Storm" by Jessica Nissen. It's the perfect image for the book: the enormous, gorgeous, complex, somewhat unreadable section at the top... and the echo or reverberation or imprint or impression that flows out from the bottom. I'm very grateful to Jessica for letting me use the painting.

## 2. What influenced this book?

As I mentioned, Ann Lauterbach's book made a big impression on me, though ultimately I didn't go in the formal direction *Under the Sign* pointed toward. I was influenced by events, by events in the past and by recent turns of events. The book, like my first book of poems, *Prior*, has poems from a long span of years. In terms of specific literary influences, it's hard to say. There's a good bit of mimicry and parody. There is a

longish poem written shortly after John Ashbery's death, in which I try to work out my conflicted relationship with that Ashbery voice. There is a good deal about my love and ambivalence toward poetry as a whole. There's a poem responding to an enormously powerful visual installation by the artist Titus Kaphar ("Time in the Ruined House"). There's a parodic political rap poem ("Mad Wrapper in the Age of Ray-Gun"). There's a poem in the voice of some purported border patrol vigilante ("Threnody on a Death at the Borders"). There are six or eight sonnets. I like sonnets. And some of these partake of nonsense. I also like nonsense. Lewis Carroll has always been a persistent voice in my head.

### 3. Where does this book fit into your career as a writer?

It's my second book of poems, my sixth book overall: two academic books, the two OBU books, and two books of poems. Like *Prior*, this brings together poems from everywhere in my "career," insofar as one could say I have a career as a poet. There are a couple of poems from the late 1970s when I was a young man in New York, just out of college. And poems from the 80s, 90s, and some recent poems. Am I the same person? Do I have the same voice? Do the poems fit together in any coherent way? No and yes/yes and no/I think so. I always had a lot of voices. I never felt that like, for instance, C.K. Williams, I had to discover the ONE voice and tone that would be my "signature." I don't have a signature. I'm happy to forge things. Who wrote the OBU books? I don't know. The first one was published anonymously. Did I write it? Am I the OBU Collective? You'll never know!

Every book I have written has been, in some capacity, a summation of where I am or was or had been. Each book tries to be everything.

### 4. If you had to convince a friend or colleague to read this book, what might you tell them?

"He asks me, when I give a poetry reading, do I explain the poems, do I give any kind of introduction or context? Because I really ought to, they're not very easy to understand. Do I read the poems in *The New Yorker* Mine are a lot like those, he says, very obscure, very self-involved. (And I say, no, my poems are not at all like the poems in *The New Yorker*; those poems are boring, mine are entertaining)."

—from "My Father's Questions"

### 5. Tell me about the last literary reading you attended.

In September 2019, I went to a reading at Erica Hunt's house in Brooklyn to see and hear Susan Schultz and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Susan and Rachel are friends (my friends, that is, as well as friends of each other),

and it pleases me a lot to be able to say that; I like them very much and both of them are very important to me as poets, so when either of them is in the NYC orbit, I try to see them. Susan especially, since she lives in Hawaii. (Both Susan and Rachel have poetry/manifestos in *OBU vol. 2*). It was a really lovely evening. Susan read mostly from her extraordinarily powerful new book, *I Want to Write an Honest Sentence*; Rachel read also mostly some recent work; I can't recall the name of the book. So, it was good to see them. Pierre Joris was there. Some other Brooklyn people. Also Douglas—what's his last name—the poet who runs the reading series at Zinc Bar in New York.

I feel I'd like to go to more readings. I don't have much time. Now— who knows when such events will resume? Bad timing, since I'd like to schedule a few for myself.

6. When did you realize you were a writer?

Second grade. I wrote a poem to my cat. In fifth and sixth grade, I wrote detective and science fiction stories, modeled on Jules Verne and on the TV show, *Get Smart*. In tenth grade, I started writing poems again. I liked Edgar Allen Poe. I wrote a narrative poem about the civil conflict in Ireland. It was in the news and moved me in some way. I no longer have the poem. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I discovered English romantic poetry and really liked Shelley for that liberatory political energy, the retelling of Prometheus. Gradually, over the next few years, I groped my way toward canonical modernist poems. I discovered Zukovsky and Gertrude Stein when I was a couple years out of college. I guess I wanted to *be* a writer by my junior year in high school. I'm not sure I've ever quite succeeded at that. I write. I feel grateful that I've been able to publish some books even though very few people read them.

7. Tell us about your process: Pen and Paper, computer, notebooks ... how do you write?

Yeah, I have notebooks. And I write on the computer. Nothing special.

8. How do you handle a bad review of your work?

Write one and I'll let you know. My second academic book, *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity* (NYU Press, 2014) got very good reviews... but in such sort of general terms that I was never entirely sure that the reviewers had actually read the book very carefully. Actually, I was quite certain the reviewers had not! It annoyed me that the reviews asserted that yes, the book was good and important to the field... but did not really engage with the book. One reviewer just misread one section. I ran into him later at a conference and mentioned that he really had gotten one point directly and diametrically wrong.

“Oh, you think I misread it?” he asked. “Uh, yeah, I’d say so,” I replied. He said, ok, maybe, it was possible. So. Life goes on. He’s a well established person in the field, whom I’d known casually for a number of years. The review was generally quite positive. What the hell. But why not read things carefully?!

Read carefully.

9. Which writer would you most like to have a drink with, and why?

In this time of sequestration, I’ve succumbed to some odd impulses. I picked up Spenser’s *Fairie Queen* and read forty or fifty stanzas. My god, what astonishingly well written poetry! I was just flabbergasted. I may have had occasion to read some Spenser in grad school in a course on Renaissance romance. And I first read part of *The Fairie Queen* in college in a course with Kenneth Koch on stanza forms. That Spenserian stanza is magic, if you can pull it off. And Spenser pulls it off over and over for 800 pages or so. Then, I had the impulse to read some Shelley, and I started “The Revolt of Islam,” and, lo and behold, it’s written in Spenserian stanzas! Quite well done, but not perfect in the way that Spenser did them. Shelley is never perfect in his prosody. There’s always a bit of clunky rhythm. And I was hearing the clunks, but then thinking, I don’t care. I like where he’s going, toward some visionary site where all the clunkiness of the fallen world of oppression and Satanic mills will fall away and the true nature of Humanity will shine in unutterable splendor. Shelley is the child of Blake. But I was wondering, why did he feel he needed Spenser for this poem. I don’t think he did it before or since. And it’s not done much, really, by anyone (except Spenser). What is the Spenserian stanza? It’s the lens that sets the eye to its true focus. That extra foot in the last line that seals the thought and brings the image home, wherever else the mind has strayed, and erred, and lingered.

So, who would I drink with if I could summon them in this Year of the Plague? Eddie Spenser and Percy B. Shelley. We’d talk about stanzas and visions, the falling away of falsehood, the summoning of truth.

10. What's the biggest mistake you've made as a writer?

Laziness, I guess. Laziness and fear. Those are more character flaws; the mistake is to give in to them. I’m afraid I’ll fail in producing the best work I’m capable of. The laziness grows largely out of the fear. I wonder whether being a basically responsible person is a mistake for a writer. To truly do your best work, do you have to be selfish? Be careless at whatever job you have? Be a lousy spouse and parent? Be absolutely committed to writing? I don’t know. I hope not. I’m committed to several things in life apart from writing—my marriage and children; teaching; political/social/environmental justice work; and music. I believe that the work of being a human being, a citizen in a democracy, and, in my case, a Jew entails obligations. To close yourself off from these other obligations means that probably you won’t produce as much writing as

you would if you ignored these obligations. So, I have to hope and to make sure that the writing I do produce is good. But I am lazy and I am scared.

## II. What's the worst advice you hear authors give writers?

“Write what you know.” First, you don’t know shit. What you think you know is exactly what you don’t know. Second, imagine something other than what you purportedly know. Use the act of writing to bring the objects of your knowledge into being. Writing, anyway, is not transcription. It’s not as if you have some prior, uncontradictory, unambivalent knowledge of some aspect of life (even, or especially, your own life) and then write it down. You have a sense of something; vague receding memory, fragments of dialogue, unanalyzed emotion, the ongoing swirl of lived-ness... and there you are, what do you do with it?

“... You’re in it, you’re of it, you’re grasping  
at every detail as if a synecdoche were a life raft.”  
–from “Someone Else Might Like This”

## 12. What scares you the most?

At this point, it’s social-political-historical matters—and I count the current pandemic as within those categories. I worry that plagues like the Covid19, and worse, will become regular global visitors; that economies will stop for extended periods; that eventually a virus will mutate to something highly contagious and with a 20% mortality rate. That would make for a very unpleasant situation. I worry that, with or without the impetus of a pandemic, the current tendencies toward more authoritarian, oligarchic, plutocratic governance will continue and accelerate. I am afraid we truly are witnessing the end of the modern, Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment inspired experiment with democracy. I am afraid that the tipping point for lasting, irremediable environmental destruction has been reached or can no longer be prevented. I’ve got young children, so I’m very concerned for their futures. I also am quite devoted and committed to this culture to which I’m trying to contribute—through teaching, art, and political action—and I am not at all at peace with the idea of this world not continuing for at least a few more millennia. I know that every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism. That’s abundantly clear. But still, there are some awfully good documents out there... and I want to think the barbarism can be turned around. I used to think it was going to happen.

That’s an astonishing and horrific revelation to me: that the end of American democracy and of a viable habitable world are taking place during my lifetime. I grew up during the period of maybe the greatest optimism in American and world history: the end of the empires, the end of racial and sexual oppressions, a

fundamental critique of capitalism that would lead to radical social transformation and abundant justice and prosperity!!! And great, beautiful, liberatory art!!! Oh yes! And now, here we are. All this shit has gone down on my watch.

Other than for those things, I'm feeling pretty good.

### 13. Where do you buy your books

Oh, still mostly Amazon, in spite of wanting not to. I buy a lot of university and small press books, and my local independent bookstore has trouble getting them—their distributor doesn't deal with them. Turns out the bookstore isn't quite as "independent" as I'd wish. There's also the university Barnes and Noble, but I'd just as soon avoid them as well.

### 14. Who are you reading now?

Just finished rereading Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*. This is the second book of a trilogy of historical novels about the first Opium War between Great Britain and China. The guy is just brilliant in depicting an emerging global economy, full of cosmopolitan, sophisticated people of hybrid cultures and polyglot argots—but, tragically, based largely on an economy of opium and falling increasingly, then suddenly, under the power of the British empire. The book is delightful in eviscerating the hypocrisies of the ideology of "Free Trade" and the blowhard British merchants—all opium traders—who endorse it. And there can be, of course, no "Free Trade" without imperial gunships to back it up. An altogether delicious and heartbreaking book.

Poetry books I've enjoyed recently: Mark Scroggins, *Pressure Dressing*; Susan Schultz, *I Want to Write an Honest Sentence*; Reginald Betts, *Felon*.

Oh, I also read an odd and enjoyable book that may or may not have been brought into the world by Kent Johnson, called *El Misterio Nadal: A Lost and Rescued Book by Roberto Bolaño*; which claims to be what the title indicates. It absolutely captures the Bolaño style, so whoever wrote it is pretty damn good.

### 15. What is your favorite TV show at the moment?

*Plot Against America*, the HBO adaptation of the great Philip Roth novel; and *Beforeigners*, an odd Norwegian show about people from the past (especially old Norse types) who suddenly start appearing in the fjords of contemporary Oslo.

Bonus Round:

What do you want the world to know about you? Make it juicy ....

Well, I spilled a few beans in my bonus question for my first book with BlazeVox, *Prior...* about being expelled from the Columbia MFA program in 1978 or so, and my undying hatred for Daniel Halpern, which lives to this day, don't worry! But I won't retell that story; you can look at the previous interview.

I wish the world would know about the terrific children's book I wrote... but I'm having trouble acquiring an agent, which aspiring children's authors have to do. *The Adventures of Captain Bingo* will be a hit, if only it can be published. It's clever and funny; it's a middle grade fantasy-comedy-drama with some roots in Roald Dahl and Lewis Carroll. But, what the hell. If any agents may be reading this, please contact me. I feel desperate about this.

I would also like the world to know about *The Diane Stevenson Story*, which is a sort of comic memoir, love story, *bildungsroman* and "portrait of the artist" as a pretty sad case that I wrote way way back, right out of college. I went back and revised it a bit a couple of years ago. It's a marvelous little book. I can't believe I wrote it, and I could only have written it right then, at that moment of youth. Only then did I have enough arrogance—or, as Diane herself used to say, "presumption." But I have no idea who would possibly publish it. If I were well-known for something else, then this book could be published as some of my brilliant, rediscovered early work. But, so it goes. It used to be early, now it's late.

When I retire from teaching in a few years, I want to compose music. I think I can do it. I'm a pretty good musician as a player. I just need some training and time. I hear things, but lack the facility to get the sounds on paper.

The thing about a *career* is that you need to repeat yourself and repeat yourself until people begin to notice; and then you must repeat yourself again in order to repeat, retain, solidify your success; so that then you are *known* as "that person," the one who... wrote the biographies of... or the several novels exploring themes of..., or the beautiful poems that make you feel vernal or autumnal, or the explosive poems that express the struggles of... And then, that's who you are: the artist or scholar that everyone knows. And you have a *career*. If you do different things, set off in different directions for each work, that makes you too difficult to know, and so no one will know you. And so you have no career.

My secret is that I have no career.